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C O N F I D E N T I A L LISBON 002160

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/27/2016

TAGS: PREL VE PO

SUBJECT: PORTUGUESE REACTION TO VENEZUELA'S CAMPAIGN USE OF  
PM SOCRATES PHOTO

REF: A. LISBON 2134

1B. LISBON 1572

Classified By: Troy Fitrell, Pol Chief, Reasons: 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (U) The Portuguese press was dominated September 28 by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's billboard campaign in Caracas, which uses a photo of Chavez together with Portuguese Prime Minister Jose Socrates, above the Venezuelan and Portuguese flags. Under the title, "Breaking the Blockade, Venezuela is Respected," the billboard is described as the first of many with presidents and other international personalities. The photograph of Socrates and Chavez together was taken when Chavez's aircraft made a refueling stop in Lisbon in July (Ref A).

¶2. (C) The Charge d'Affaires called the Prime Minister's Diplomatic Advisor, Jorge Roza de Oliveira, the morning of September 28 to solicit the GOP reaction and encourage Socrates to distance himself from Chavez. Roza de Oliveira described the billboard campaign as an "abuse of the image" and said that the Foreign Minister's office planned to issue a statement shortly.

¶3. (C) Meanwhile, the Foreign Minister's Diplomatic Advisor, Paulo Lourenco, reached out to us in an unsolicited call to state that the Portuguese government felt "duped and used" and said that the Ministry was calling in the Venezuelan Ambassador for an explanation. Lourenco further suggested that Chavez's behavior was "childish" and might be seen as amusing if it did not "sully the name of Portugal."

¶4. (C) Comment: The GOP treads carefully with Chavez to avoid inviting recriminations against the half-million Portuguese citizens resident in Venezuela. Portuguese officials at all levels have expressed concern about Chavez's unorthodox behavior but have stressed their view that it is better to engage him than to isolate him. The latest incident, however, has angered the Portuguese, who feel taken advantage of, and likely will make them much more wary when dealing with Chavez in the future. That is certainly the approach we will continue to encourage. We have asked Lourenco and Roza de Oliveira to keep us apprised of the results of the meeting with the Venezuelan ambassador and to share a copy of the MFA statement when it is released.  
O'Neal